

# The Vernacular Tradition in Atlantic Canada

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[See table of contents](#)

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That *Heartland and Hinterland* does not quite succeed in its attempt to bring this type of study to the level of synthesis is merely proof that more local studies are needed. In the meantime historians have much to learn from Professor McCann and the historical geographers whose work has brightly illuminated some shadowy dimensions of the Canadian past.

RAMSAY COOK

### The Vernacular Tradition in Atlantic Canada

IN EUROPEAN CULTURE THERE ARE TWO great strains, the one line going back to classical Greece and Rome and the other to the local cultures of medieval Europe. Regional or national or vernacular cultures have managed to survive despite the dominance of the Greco-Roman strain in the West, especially since the Renaissance when the social hierarchy which dictated matters of taste and cultural direction placed the culture of Greece and Rome in domineering ascendancy over the national cultures of Europe. The cultural dictates of the Renaissance established a hegemony which was hostile to anything local or regional. Even when the nationalist-oriented Reformation occurred in the Western Church, the cultural inheritance of Rome survived in Protestant countries as much as in ones which remained Catholic. The classic example of the cultural schizophrenia which resulted is Dr. Johnson in the 18th century attempting to fit the fullness of Shakespeare's English genius into the squares of the Renaissance notion of classical dramatic unities. Dr. Johnson loved Shakespeare yet was committed to a cultural regime which saw Shakespeare's "native woodnotes wild" as barbarous. It was not until the 19th-century romantic and French Revolutions overthrew the supremacist ideology of the Renaissance that Swedes, Germans, Hungarians, Irishmen and Englishmen began to discover the excellence of their own national cultures. But the intervening centuries had done great psychological damage to the self-esteem of vernacular cultures.

The culture of Atlantic Canada is a complex and varied one which, in the main, reflects these tensions within the European cultural tradition. Moreover, in our own country Renaissance cultural imperialism has been supplemented by political, cultural and economic domination by France, Britain and the United States. Whatever culture existed here at the local or regional level was either given no regard at all or seen as a debased form of something already suspect. Institutions such as the school and the university were witting or unwitting agents of an elitist culture which was presented as superior and hostile to the culture in which most people were raised. The superior-inferior or metropolis-hinterland syndrome vitiated the revival of cultures which had been victims of it. A Welsh-speaking friend had the experience of going to a Welsh school where the teaching was in the Welsh language but in a "superior" form to the Welsh

the children heard spoken at home. The children were vigorously enjoined not to speak the Welsh they heard at home and in the village, with the result that they spoke English since it was understood by everybody. This story can be repeated over and over again in Atlantic Canada, substituting for Welsh Gaelic, Acadian, non-standard English.

It is only recently that novels using regional dialects have seen the light of day. Antonine Maillet's pioneering masterpiece *La Sagouine* (1971) has had a great success in the Maritimes, Quebec, Canada, France and other parts of Europe. The book has had an enormous cultural importance in giving legitimacy and status to the Acadian language. Like Sean O'Casey's plays in the Dublin argot of the 1920s which brought popularity to the moribund Abbey Theatre, *La Sagouine* draws from the rich source of energy in the life of ordinary, mostly non-literate people whose penetrating grasp on life around them has had, perforce, to be embodied in the only expressive vehicle available to them, language. Maillet and those like her who use the vernacular repository as their artistic source are exactly comparable to the writers of Elizabethan England such as Shakespeare who took the vitality and wisdom of everyday speech and made from it their masterpieces. It may be, too, that just as Shakespeare's work was really a testament to the dying world of medieval England, the production of such works as *La Sagouine* may be monuments to a world which will soon pass, if indeed it has not already passed.

*La Sagouine* viewed as a cultural vindication of the Acadian language is comparable to a different kind of linguistic event in the Atlantic anglophone world, G.M. Story, W.J. Kirwin, J.D.A. Widdowson, eds., *Dictionary of Newfoundland English* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1982). *The Dictionary* has as much cultural and social importance as it has scholarly; indeed, in the long run its chief importance will be cultural. The book's effect in non-academic circles was almost magical: for the first time thousands of people experienced seeing in "a book" the words, now half-forgotten, which had been used in childhood or even in adult years. All the dictionary's scholarly apparatus, its years of dedicated work, were either ignored or forgotten in the half-guilty discovery of something as intimate as one's own store of words existing in a printed book. For dialect in Newfoundland was frequently a whip used against one. To borrow from Shaw, the moment one Newfoundlander opened his mouth he made another one despise him. Those who dropped haitches were made to feel the opprobrium of those who didn't and the latter were generally in the social ascendancy. "Bayman", "baywop", "didum" — the last term not included in the *Dictionary* — were used to denigrate the speaker of some undesirable dialect. Businessmen in the post-Confederation world went to a variety of "charm schools" to be schooled out of their linguistic heritage at the same time that a mass of carpetbaggers scoured the coastal villages and towns pillaging the now priceless artefacts from the material heritage.

But the *Dictionary* is there now, giving place and the proper sort of academic approval to the complex linguistic inheritance of Newfoundland. One wonders

what riches would have been there for the editors to work upon had the Victorian cultural milieu allowed Newfoundland speech to be printed in some approximation to what was said. One thinks of the trial of Captain Abram Kean after the Newfoundland disaster in 1914, in which testimony of the sealers was reported in the newspapers verbatim. Alas! — the dialect of the sealers was reported in standard English as if these hardy men had stepped off the boat from away. Similarly one can only guess at what the peculiarities of dialect were to which one sees occasional jocular reference in the reports of the House of Assembly debates published in the St. John's newspapers of the 19th century.

Thankfully some of the rich store of words from Ireland and the West of England and the equally rich treasure of Newfoundland-originated words and variant pronunciations and meanings has been preserved. However, again one has the same feeling in looking over this dictionary as in reading Maillet's *La Sagouine* — of its being a monument to the past. So much of the language recorded is analogous to the lasts and spinning wheels bought up in antique stores, something whose shape and function are no longer part, or not very much a part, of the modern world. It is too bad that the dialects were so completely unfashionable when their currency was fresher and when it may have been possible for the richness of word and idiom, phrase and sentence to have taken deeper hold on the consciousness.

Nevertheless, it is curious to see how some of that deeper hold of language and the oral tradition on the consciousness remains alive in the present-day language of Newfoundland. This is clearly shown by a fine book on the language of Newfoundland politics, Robert Paine's *Ayatollahs & Turkey Trots: Political Rhetoric in the New Newfoundland* (St. John's, Breakwater Books, 1981). To be a success in Newfoundland, a politician or any public figure must be a good talker. What Robert Paine's book does, is to show how the language situation in Newfoundland, however much it may have lost by the passing of the language associated with an earlier way of life, has retained a good deal of vitality and effervescence because the oral tradition itself is still relatively healthy in Newfoundland.

The newspaper, as Paine shows, is still an important ingredient in the cultural mix in Newfoundland. The farther one goes back in the history of the whole Atlantic region, the more weight has to be placed upon newspapers and journalists for the feel of the times and for some sense of the attitudes and responses to reality at home and abroad. In the absence of journals and magazines, newspapers served as crucial vehicles for the transmission of all sorts of culturally important material from a ghost story to a report of a diphtheria outbreak.

Paul Rutherford's recently published *A Victorian Authority: The Daily Press in Late Nineteenth-Century Canada* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1982) although an interesting examination of the role of the Canadian press in that era is disappointing for the reader interested in the influence of the press in Atlantic Canada. The book's concentration on the mass-circulation dailies of

the late 19th century means that the focus of interest is on central Canada with peripheral inclusion of the Halifax and Saint John dailies. Prince Edward Island and Newfoundland papers of the era are not even considered, and of course the huge number of papers published twice or three times a week, the weeklies and monthlies which were so important in the predominantly rural world of Atlantic Canada before the 1914-1918 war are not considered at all. Clearly there is room for a careful examination of the role of the press in the Atlantic region using some of the examining apparatus of Rutherford's book but including an examination of the role played by the press in echoing or shaping public opinion and reflecting popular taste and culture.

The chore of working through the files of newspapers which at one time abounded in the Atlantic region as elsewhere is an arduous one, but one which the researcher into the social history of this region neglects at his or her peril. Evidence of one kind of material to be found through such a search is the recently issued series of folktales and stories, *Hair from a Black Stallion's Tail* (Fredericton, 1982). Written for the Saint John *Globe* some 60 years ago by Frank Hatheway, this selection of stories prepared by J.K. Chapman is made up of ghostly folktales which Hatheway heard on his travels through the Maritimes. They range in area from Cape Smokey to the Kennebecasis and the Gaspé, and have the feel of folktales one could hear from Quebec to Newfoundland. Hatheway was one of many regional writers who reached their audience before the advent of radio and *Maclean's Magazine* through the newspaper, the only secular print which entered many homes. Debates on issues as far removed as the landfall of John Cabot to Nova Scotia's pulling out of Confederation all took place within the pages of the daily press, and Christmas supplements with their melange of local history, anecdote and folklore were a much more sought after item than the latest glossy advertisement from Eaton's or K-Mart is now.

The publication of such diverse items as the *Dictionary of Newfoundland English* and *La Sagouine* is part of a burgeoning in the publication about the regional culture which began in the 1960s and is continuing. Nowadays the academic interest in local culture is responsible for a lot of the books being published. However, it was not always fashionable for academics to take an interest in regional concerns. This is understandable since the academic community has been the bastion of "Renaissance" culture and the place most hostile to what it deemed "parochialism". The new atmosphere and attitude to regional studies which now obtains owes much to the dedicated local historians, historical societies, and museums, small and large, which operated for years on the fringes of the academic world and whose work was often enough made the butt of academic snobbery: the word "antiquarian" was frequently used as a put-down to describe the interest in what was local and of the past.

In the academic world the one area which has shown the greatest sympathy to the study of local culture has been folklore, which was itself regarded as a suspect study and to some extent still is by certain academics. Indeed one suspects that a lot of the narrowed focus and scientific trappings of some folk-

lore studies are the consequence of pressure felt by academic folklorists to give themselves an academic legitimacy. Recent folklore study publications raise issues which have important cultural consequences for the region, especially for the anglophone communities. The first of these is the collection, Kenneth S. Goldstein and Neil V. Rosenberg, eds., *Folklore Studies in Honour of Herbert Halpert* (St. John's, Memorial University of Newfoundland, 1980), a festschrift of essays in honour of Professor Halpert, who brought folklore to Memorial University in Newfoundland and initiated the great folklore archives there.

Two of the most interesting and stimulating essays in the collection are those by Carole Henderson Carpenter, "Forty Years Later: Maude Karpeles in Newfoundland" and Gerald Pocius, "George Sturt and His Village: Toward Alternative Views of English Folkloristics". The issues both essays raise have to do with the way in which the collector or folklorist from outside a culture can fail to see that it is a culture with which he or she is dealing, not material for someone's academic work — "Who Killed James Joyce? I, with my Harvard Thesis" wrote the Irish poet Patrick Kavanagh. Maude Karpeles came to Newfoundland in 1929 looking for the residues of British ballads and, as Carpenter writes, "finding these songs relatively scarce, was disappointed". Meanwhile she passed over as insignificant or unimportant the local Newfoundland material, much of which has since vanished. It is, of course, obvious to one now that "Maude's was, in truth, a rather paternalistic-colonialist approach to collecting"! But the important thing to realize is that the person collecting in a particular culture at any time whose intellectual and imaginative formation is not part of that culture runs the risk of doing something similar to Maude Karpeles.

The very process of "folklorization" of items from a culture is a distortion. The English rural writer George Sturt was painfully aware of this in his attempt to present a whole picture of life in his native village of Farneham, as Pocius shows in his essay. Sturt was a native of the village, though from outside the rural working class whose life he was trying to depict. The selective nature of any process of writing or presentation of a culture is inevitable. In anglophone Atlantic Canada where folklore as an academic discipline is not a local growth, there is a need to stress the caveat implicit in Sturt's words quoted in Pocius's essay: "I looked at it [Farneham Fair] as in the zoo one looks at the animals knowing nothing of the inner life going on". The folkloric situation can easily become the providing of "material" to be worked upon, carried off to the laboratory where it can be compared and contrasted with material from some other place. In that "scientific" world the material is all equal and is thus discussed and dissected like a cadaver upon the table.

*A Folklore Sampler from the Maritimes* (St. John's, Memorial University of Newfoundland, 1982), edited by Herbert Halpert, is a curious mixture of material collected by Halpert in 1979-80 when he was holder of the Winthrop Pickard Bell Chair of Maritime Studies at Mount Allison University. There is also an essay by Martin J. Lovelace, a former student of Halpert's, on the subject of Santa Clawing or Clausing in Nova Scotia. This is included with a collection of

materials on Christmas, mostly from Newfoundland. The mixed bag of items appears to have as its justification the need to show what can be done in collecting Maritime folklore material. However, as Halpert himself admits in his introduction, "some folklore items are far from meeting present-day folkloristic standards. . . an understanding of both context and performance is needed to obtain a fuller understanding of what the folklore items mean to people". The ensemble may be suitable for what its purpose was: to let people know, presumably in academic circles, what kinds of folklore could be collected at a university. But despite this and the fullsome notes which make up the text, it seems that it is far from being what its title suggests it to be, *A Folklore Sampler from the Maritimes*. Certainly it does point to the need for a centre for anglophone folklore study at a Maritime university where the collecting of folkloric and folk cultural materials can be done as it is at Moncton, Laval and Memorial, and where the materials' importance inside the culture can be examined and assessed.

Folkloric materials are part of a continuing cultural reality. Like language, they are changing constantly either in their physical shape and meaning or in how they are regarded once they have lost currency and are mere antiquities. However, the survival of physical items from the cultural past gives a culture's reality continuity of purpose. The artefact is a bond with the past and a ratification of the durability of the past; it is to a culture something similar to memory in an individual. The recently published book on the churches of Nova Scotia between 1750 and 1830, Allan Duffus, Edward MacFarlane, Elizabeth Pacey, George Rogers, *Thy Dwellings Fair* (Hantsport, Lancelot Press, 1982), attempts and largely achieves its goal of presenting these buildings' survival in a broad cultural perspective. We are not only given pictures of the churches but also in most cases drawings of the floor plans, and the book provides an interesting and simple architectural history into which the individual churches can be set. The preponderance of Anglican churches is obviously not the result of arbitrary choice and should be explained: why are there not more Baptist buildings? But here again some explanation for this rests in the cultural pattern of Nova Scotia during the period covered.

An example of the way academic folkloric skill can be combined with sensitive appreciation of the culture into which one is born and bred is Wilfred Wareham's edition of Victor Butler's *Little Nord Easter* (St. John's, Breakwater Books, 1980). As J.D.A. Widdowson writes in his preface, "Few could be better qualified than he to undertake the presentation of this first volume in the Archive's community study series. Born and raised, like Victor Butler, in Harbour Buffett, he left the community to study folklore and related subjects. . . and can therefore view his birthplace and his study of it from both the inside and the outside". Detailing Victor Butler's views of the "parish" of Placentia Bay, this is an important and interesting book in the context of Newfoundland regional culture and suggests comparison with cultures beyond the shores of Placentia Bay. For Victor Butler is the seanachaidh of Irish or Scottish life or the racon-

teur from the Beauce country of Quebec.

A similar kind of perspective is provided in a number of other books issued recently in Breakwater Books' Folklore-Folklife series. Helen Porter's *Below the Bridge* (1979) gives us an insider's non-nostalgic view of life on the South Side of St. John's before that community was destroyed. The book achieves a marvellous intimacy while eschewing a weepy nostalgia. The folk revival going on in Newfoundland over the past number of years has produced a sufficient number of lachrymose books and ballads to water the genuine cultural plant into steadier growth. Another fine and thoughtfully written book is Hilda Chaulk Murray's *More than 50%* (1979) which details the burden of outport women who shouldered more than their 50 per cent with the men in the bad old days before Joey burnt the boats with baby bonus cheques. It is through books such as these that the cultural past in Newfoundland is being preserved. In a similar way magazines such as *Cape Breton's Magazine* and *Them Days* have helped enormously in putting the flavour of life actually lived into the presence of a generation which has been largely ignorant of a cultural past chronologically so few years beyond it, yet eons beyond the gallop of the modern world.

The cultural ambience of French Canada, whether Acadian or Québécois, has provided itself with a clearer focus than has that of what, for want of a better phrase, we could call anglophone Atlantic Canada. The church and the French language have given to the culture a unity from which a distinct intellectual and spiritual view has been generated. The culture of French Canada has seen itself through its own eyes and not with the eyes of others. This has not led to a paranoia about outsiders but rather has engendered and nourished a sureness of where French Canada fitted in the wider contexts of European and world culture. This intensity of and loyalty to French Canada's traditions while keeping a firm sense of its place in a larger scheme can be seen in Jean-Claude Dupont, ed., *Mélanges en l'honneur de Luc Lacourcière* (Montreal, Leméac, 1978). Those who wrote pieces for it make note of the central place held by, in their turn, Marius Barbeau and his successor as "dean" of French-Canadian cultural historians and folklorists, Luc Lacourcière. Lacourcière's studies in Europe and America built upon the solid basis of the primary culture in which he was raised and with which he had an enviable intimacy. In her homage to "le maître", Antonine Maillet shows how Lacourcière's intimacy with the totality of French and European culture pushed her into seeing the connection between the study of Rabelais and her native Acadian folk tradition and language.

Language and folklore are the two aspects of folk culture which contain the quintessence of any oral culture. Language is the vehicle of the folkstory, the legend, the witty saying and that material is inextricably linked with language itself, with dialect, with expression and with what the Acadians value especially, "riposte". The inter-relationship between dialect and folklore is the ground where national literatures arise: from folklore comes the mythology and from language and dialect the particular embodiment of it. The one great national



literature of Europe which comes to mind here is that of Ireland, where writers such as Yeats, Synge and Lady Gregory produced great literature from the interplay of language and folklore.

In Atlantic Canada this same cross-fertilization is most strongly at work in the cultures of Acadia and of Newfoundland, where national languages exist side by side with a native folklore tradition. The most important thing that people such as Luc Lacourcière and Herbert Halpert have been and can be for people in this region is bolsterers of our people's confidence that to study themselves in the context of their own culture is the most important part of human life. As the Irish writer Patrick Kavanagh wrote in attempting to define the difference between "provincial" and "parochial": "the provincial has no mind of his own; he does not trust what his eyes see until he has heard what the metropolis. . . has had to say on the subject. . . . The Parochial mentality on the other hand never is in any doubt about the social and artistic validity of his parish".

CYRIL BYRNE

### Saint John: Port and City

HISTORIES OF CANADIAN COASTAL SOCIETIES invariably document the competing influences of land and sea. Newfoundland, the Maritime Provinces, and Vancouver Island have each experienced, at different times and in different ways, the complex and difficult task of choosing between coastal and oceanic ties or continental connections. The quest for an industrial economy led Newfoundlanders to abandon first their Atlantic fishery and eventually their trans-Atlantic colonial status in favour of economic and political modernization, ending in Confederation with Canada.<sup>1</sup> Vancouver Island joined Canada only reluctantly, pressured by the imperial government and economic necessity; it succeeded in maintaining its Pacific trade and British outlook for a quarter-century after the constitutional union, but was finally drawn by the impact of railways into a more transcontinental orbit.<sup>2</sup> Perhaps best known to historians is the Maritime colonies' difficult adjustment to the Canadian economic and political system, a subject explored both in literature about the debate over

1 Terry Campbell and G.A. Rawlyk, "The Historical Framework of Newfoundland and Confederation", in Rawlyk, ed., *The Atlantic Provinces and the Problems of Confederation*. (St. John's, 1979), pp. 48-84 and David Alexander, "Development and Dependence in Newfoundland, 1880-1970", *Acadiensis*, IV, 1 (Autumn 1974), pp. 3-31.

2 Isabel Bescoby, "A Colonial Administration: An Analysis of Administration in British Columbia, 1869-1871", in J. Friesen and H.K. Ralston, eds., *Historical Essays on British Columbia* (Toronto, 1976), pp. 122-51 and R.A.J. McDonald, "Victoria, Vancouver and the Evolution of British Columbia's Economic System, 1886-1914", in Alan F.J. Artibise, ed., *Town and City: Aspects of Western Canadian Urban Development* (Regina, 1981), pp. 31-55.